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Tennessee's Black Postwar Emigration Movements, 1866–1880

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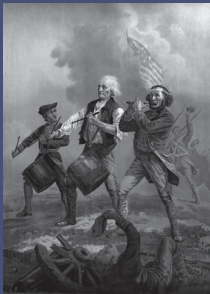
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Tennessee Historical QUARTERLY

FRONT COVER

Soldiers of the Continental Lines formed the core of the army in the American Revolutionary War. North Carolina rewarded many in its state's Continental Line with land grants in its western district, which would later become Tennessee. ("Yankee Doodle 1776," ca. 1876 print, Library of Congress)



BACK COVER

Between 1866 and 1880, many of Tennessee's ex-slaves chose to leave the state. The Exodusters headed for Kansas; this homestead ca. 1890 in Nicodemus epitomizes their new life there. (Library of Congress)



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TENNESSEE'S BLACK POSTWAR EMIGRATION MOVEMENTS, 1866–1880

BY SELENA SANDERFER

We have held meetings to
ourselves to see if we can't plan
some way to live. *(Repeat)*

Chorus—Marching along, yes, we
are marching along, To Kansas
City we are bound. *(Repeat)*

We have Mr. Singleton for our
president. He will go on before us
and lead us through. *(Repeat)*

For Tennessee is a hard slavery
state, and we find no friends in
that country. *(Repeat)*

We want peaceful homes and
quiet firesides; no one to disturb
us or turn us out. *(Repeat)*

This song, titled “The Land that Gives Birth to Freedom,” expresses the distress and the hope felt by Tennessee’s “Exodusters.” Denied economic and political freedom, many of Tennessee’s ex-slaves emigrated to all-black settlements in Kansas beginning in the late 1860s. The movement reached its zenith in 1879 during the “Exodus Fever,” when in the course of one year thousands left the state. Kansas, however, was not the only destination under consideration. Throughout the postwar period many Tennesseans chose to emigrate to Liberia, on the West African coast. Founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society (ACS) for the resettlement of the Republic’s free black population, Liberia continued to serve as a destination for black emigrants after the Civil War. Like the Exodusters, Liberian emigrants were driven primarily by practical concerns

HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Ho for Kansas!

Brethren, Friends, & Fellow Citizens:

I feel thankful to inform you that the

REAL ESTATE

AND

Homestead Association,

Will Leave Here the

15th of April, 1878,

In pursuit of Homes in the Southwestern
Lands of America, at Transportation
Rates, cheaper than ever
was known before.

For full information inquire of

Benj. Singleton, better known as old Pap,
NO. 5 NORTH FRONT STREET.

Beware of Speculators and Adventurers, as it is a dangerous thing
to fall in their hands.

Nashville, Tenn., March 18, 1878.

Between 1866 and 1880, many of Tennessee's ex-slaves chose to leave the state. The Exodusters headed for Kansas; this poster sets a departure from Nashville on April 15, 1878. (Kansas State Historical Society)

surrounding their lack of economic and political power in the postbellum South.

Numerous studies have examined black territorial separatism and emigration.² Even so, scholars have been reluctant to suggest that relocating to Liberia or Kansas was a form of resistance rather than a response to racial oppression. Nor has a study comparing the developmental patterns of multiple separatist movements over time and region yet been completed. This article aims to correct these oversights by conducting a chronological survey of separatist movements from each of the three grand divisions of Tennessee. In Middle Tennessee, emigration was caused by the violent political oppression of blacks between 1866 and 1870. Most often, separatists from this region left for Liberia. The exodus from West Tennessee exploded in the mid-to-late 1870s, when economic mobility was impeded by the inability to purchase land. Instead of Liberia, these separatists chose Kansas as their destination. In East Tennessee several movements emerged in the late 1860s and early 1870s; they, too, tended to move to Liberia.

In following emigration from the three grand divisions, this article reveals the dynamics of "movement emergence" through the process of information diffusion—when supporters in one region spread news to other geographic areas. Perhaps more powerfully, its focus on Tennessee's grassroots emigration movements illuminates an alternative view for

the development of radical black thought in the United States. This perspective does not center on the black intellectual history of the antebellum North, nor does it focus on free black elites. Instead, it explores contributions made by southern freedmen and women. Indeed, after the Civil War ex-slaves looked forward to a life of freedom and the benefits of democracy. Many hoped to become independent landowners, and secure a prosperous livelihood for themselves and their families. Most freedmen never achieved these goals, however. The government's failure to implement land redistribution, the refusal of white landowners to sell land to ex-slaves, and the coercion of blacks into unfair labor and tenancy contracts are but a few of the factors that hindered black Southern economic independence during the postwar era. Expectations of political equality also went unfulfilled, as white southerners continually threatened the few rights the freedman community had gained. Emigration offered a meaningful alternative for alleviating these conditions. And in supporting relocation freedmen and women contributed to the development of nineteenth century Black Nationalism, giving it a character uniquely shaped by southern ideals of land and liberty.

Historian Claude Andrew Clegg defines Black Nationalism as "a general template of ideologies, programs, and political visions geared toward encouraging racial pride, collective action,



At the 1871 Tennessee State Colored Convention, blacks decried the "Pale Faces or Kuklux," who sought to "depreciate the labor of the colored men and control it by their individual and united action." (Members of the KKK, from *Harper's Weekly*, December 19, 1868)

and group autonomy among people of African descent."³ Territorial separatism is one component of Black Nationalism whereby blacks sought to emigrate to or establish all-black areas in which to live. Before the Civil War the lack of political opportunities necessitated black participation in white social movements in order to achieve goals of self-determination.⁴

Community-directed territorial separatism developed after 1865, when freedmen were able publicly to articulate and independently organize a Black Nationalist agenda.

While historians have traditionally studied the advent of Black Nationalism and protest in the United States in the context of black urban and northern

elites, more recent studies have begun to investigate the tradition of political resistance in the South. Post-Civil War tactics of repression, such as acts of racial violence and black voter disenfranchisement, created an inauspicious atmosphere for black southerners to obtain their political and economic goals. As freedmen, however, they did have one protest weapon that was difficult to deny: that of physical mobility. A common form of protest became known as “voting by one’s feet.” It occurred when dissatisfied residents, faced with limited opportunities for political or economic redress in one locale, chose to relocate to a more hospitable area. Although emigration may not have had an overt political message such as integration, suffrage, or political representation, it nonetheless had what historian Steven Hahn calls “political resonance,” helping to “widen and transform, as well as sustain, political activism.”⁵ Historians must continue to employ a broad definition of political activism in order to credit fully and represent the political assertiveness of ex-slaves and others to improve their situation.

State conventions illustrate the concerns of black Tennesseans during the Reconstruction Era. Black convention meetings throughout the state in the 1860s and 1870s insisted on basic improvements in protection, housing, education, political and labor rights.⁶ The most resounding calls, however, were for economic self-determination. At an 1871

Tennessee Colored State Convention, blacks decried the “Pale Faces or Kuklux” who sought to “depreciate the labor of the colored men and control it by their individual and united action.”⁷ The sentiments of common freedmen regarding land acquisition and socioeconomic mobility were expressed when delegates from Obion County resolved to “recommend the colored citizens throughout the State, to identify themselves with horticultural pursuits, secure a homestead and gain a competence by the products of the earth, and as far as possible free themselves from the influence and the dictation of the oppressive land-holder.”⁸ The Obion Country representatives were not alone in their charge. At the conclusion of that convention a petition was sent to Congress and President Ulysses S. Grant calling on them to help freedmen secure economic livelihoods, specifically by the creation of a commission to purchase and lease tracts of land to ex-slaves for settlement.⁹

As Reconstruction progressed and the hopes of freedmen and freedwomen for protection and economic support from the federal government dissipated, black Tennesseans began to take matters into their own hands. It was during this period that black southerners for the first time decided when to initiate separatist movements. Deciding where to settle varied by timing, organizational outlook, and availability. Kansas and Liberia were not the only places separatists considered suitable.

In 1876 a convention of black men in Jackson, Tennessee, suggested the formation of an all-black state out of parts of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi. They reasoned that a significant number of blacks immigrating to southern Mississippi would cause whites to leave the area and that a number of Gulf States would eventually become entirely populated by blacks.¹⁰ Kansas and Liberia would have been more familiar, however, because of their shared histories of supporting black freedom and entrepreneurship prior to 1865. Memories of Liberian independence in 1849, the violent tactics of free soilers in “Bleeding Kansas” during the mid-1850s, and the opportunities for land ownership (for both black and white) ushered in by the Homestead Act of 1862 endeared both areas in the hearts of black southerners.

Ideological motivations such as African cultural affinity, racial uplift, and evangelization were important to elite or northern Black Nationalists, but they were not decisive for southern black emigrants when considering relocation.¹¹ Racial uplift strategies implied a deviancy among black people and culture, while civilizing missions most commonly referred to the need for evangelization and adoption of middle class social values. Instead of ranking destinations by these objectives, black southerners rationalized possible settlement locations by considering principally the geo-economic and political characteristics of a region. Black

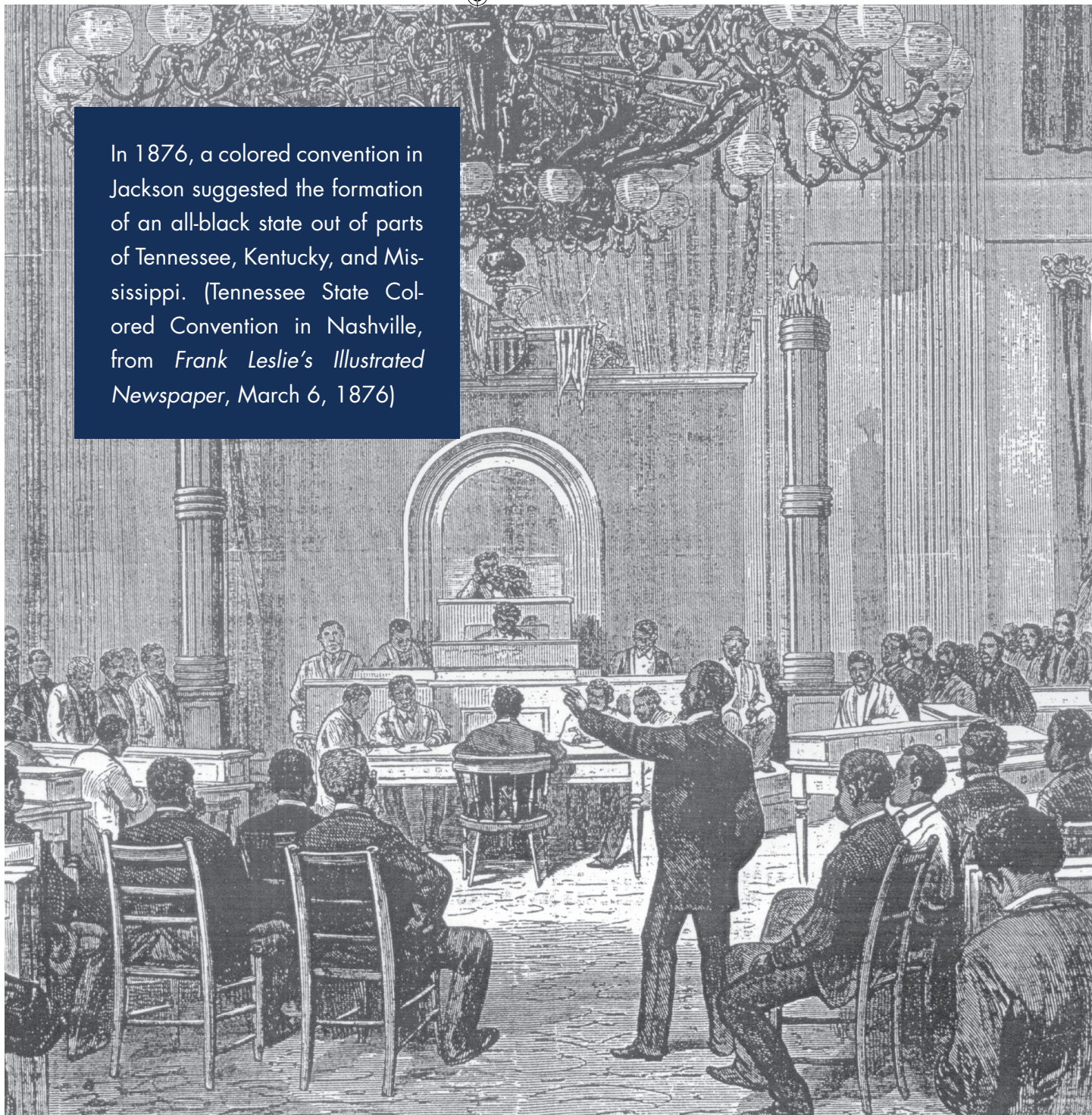
separatists in Tennessee, whether choosing to leave for Liberia or Kansas, were motivated by the common cause to obtain rights as landowners.

Indeed, during the nineteenth century agricultural production was the foundation of the southern economy, and like many other freedmen throughout the Atlantic World black Tennesseans’ desire for landownership was unwavering.¹² In addition, they sought to exercise political power through voting, serving on juries, and holding political office. For the former slaves and poor free blacks who comprised the black lower class, neither goal was negotiable. When challenged by the dominant society they formed a separatist ideology equating both political rights and economic independence with true freedom. These aspirations implied degrees of economic and political self-determination and reflected the priorities of lower class black southern separatists.

Contemporary community leaders commented on postwar black emigrant motivation, in the process addressing a central question: why choose to leave the South, and with it the only home most had ever known, in order to settle in an unfamiliar territory? In 1880 the eminent abolitionist and civil rights activist Frederick Douglass perceptively noted that

Necessity often compels men to migrate, to leave their old homes and seek new ones, to sever old ties

In 1876, a colored convention in Jackson suggested the formation of an all-black state out of parts of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi. (Tennessee State Colored Convention in Nashville, from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, March 6, 1876)



and create new ones; but to do this the necessity should be obvious and imperative. It should be a last resort, and only adopted after carefully considering what is against the measure, as well as what is in favor of it. There are prodigal sons everywhere, who are ready to demand the portion of goods

that would fall to them, and betake themselves to a strange country.¹³

Although Douglass was not an advocate of emigration, he understood its causes. "Necessity" must compel an established population to uproot itself. The necessity that compelled black southern-

ers to emigrate was a combination of factors, but primarily it was the frustration of black political and economic liberty by a government dedicated to white supremacy and the terror inflicted upon blacks by whites.

Tennessee has an extensive history of black emigration. In the 1820s abolitionist Francis Wright founded the Nashoba settlement for slaves who agreed to work and undergo a period of training before obtaining full freedom and resettling abroad.¹⁴ Wright's solution was designed to appease both pro- and anti-slavery advocates by providing for manumission while simultaneously alleviating fears about the presence of free blacks—who were often seen as subversive elements within a slave society.

The membership of the ACS and its state auxiliary the Tennessee Colonization Society (TCS) included both anti-slavery and pro-slavery factions. Beginning with the first group of emigrants in 1829, the ACS and TCS sent over 700 black Tennesseans to Liberia during the antebellum period. Emigrants included the slaves of such notable state figures as industrialist Montgomery Bell and State Senator William E. Kennedy.¹⁵

Senator Kennedy's support of colonization would not have alienated him from his constituents. In the 1830s and 1850s the Tennessee General Assembly allocated state funds to the colonization movement. In 1833 it also supported a measure that provided ten dollars to the TCS for

each black person removed from Middle Tennessee and transported to Liberia. In part because of these measures, black participation increased by about eighteen percent over the next three years. By 1837 a total of fifty-eight people had successfully emigrated. In the proslavery climate of the 1850s, Tennessee witnessed yet another marked increase in the number of black emigrants. While only four expeditions to Liberia had taken place during the 1840s, thirty-four expeditions carrying a total of 508 emigrants left during the 1850s.¹⁶

Early black separatists depended on the support of white sympathizers. Enslaved blacks who wanted to emigrate had no choice but to work within the white colonization movement. Black southerners participated in these types of social movements because these were the only means available to them to achieve their goals of political and economic freedom. Even so, their contribution and commitment to black territorial separatism should not be underestimated. While many early black participants were ex-slaves who were freed under the stipulation that they had to emigrate once manumitted, they still had a choice. They were not forced to partake in utopian or colonization schemes, and many chose to remain enslaved and stay in the South. These antebellum black emigrants left the South in order to correct racial injustice by seeking prosperity abroad, which solidifies their place in the Black Nationalist tradition.

After the Civil War, southern blacks continued to work with predominantly white colonization societies such as the ACS. The fact that some ACS members were former slave owners generally did not deter blacks from seeking assistance when attempting to emigrate to Liberia. Now, however, they could organize movements at their own discretion and under their own leadership, with far less consideration given to white sensibilities.

Soon after the war ended Tennessee freedmen began to discuss emigration as a plausible solution to improving their condition. It was considered by black representatives at the State Convention of Colored Men in 1866 and 1876, and was one of the main topics of the Negro National Convention in 1879. During all three years a large number of emigrants left Tennessee for either Liberia or Kansas. Even so, it is unlikely that convention representatives would have widely supported the movements. As members of the black upper class, they were much less likely to advocate separatism. Black representatives at the 1876 state convention showed only passive support for Exodusters, noting that emigration was something "we are not going to tear our shirts about."¹⁷ Separatism, it seemed, was much more popular among the black lower class. In Middle Tennessee, this class was motivated in large part by political persecution occurring in the second half of the 1860s.

In 1867 Tennessee became the first state in the South to grant universal male suffrage, but the white population generally did not respect it. Between 1866 and 1869 racial tensions arose across the state as political changes enfranchised freedmen and disenfranchised ex-Confederates. By 1870 the state had been politically "Redeemed." White leaders implemented poll taxes, followed by literacy tests and open ballots, all of which undermined black political power. Fearing the growth of Radical Republicanism, whites also intimidated would-be black voters with physical violence. Legislators also eliminated provisions for the equal education of blacks and whites, replacing them with a segregated system in which county governments could use their own discretion when choosing to institute public schools. Violence and educational and political oppression in Middle Tennessee convinced separatist sympathizers to search for better opportunities in Liberia.¹⁸

Between 1867 and 1869 seventy-six Middle Tennessee freedmen participated in three emigration movements to Liberia. During this period more than 179 murders were committed, mostly against freedmen. Of that number only eleven accused perpetrators were tried in court, and no one was convicted. In an attempt to curb the violence Governor William Brownlow warned armed groups to disband in 1868. He reinforced this warning by ordering the state militia to disperse any armed groups they encountered.¹⁹

However, for most black Tennesseans this declaration provided little effective protection from armed vigilantes.

When black Middle Tennesseans attempted to defend themselves, many times they found that their efforts were thwarted by whites. In 1865 William Ballard reported that six armed white men forcibly entered his house and stole his gun powder. Similarly, T. Mahoney entered Lewis Drennon's house in search of weapons. When none were found, he viciously beat Drennon about the head with a pistol while his family members watched. Drennon's wife went to the family's chest and gave Mahoney their meager savings along with other household valuables. Drennon found safety by fleeing to a neighbor's house after the attack, but his father-in-law was not so lucky. He was too elderly to flee, and when Mahoney returned with more men, they mercilessly beat the old man. He died two days later.²⁰

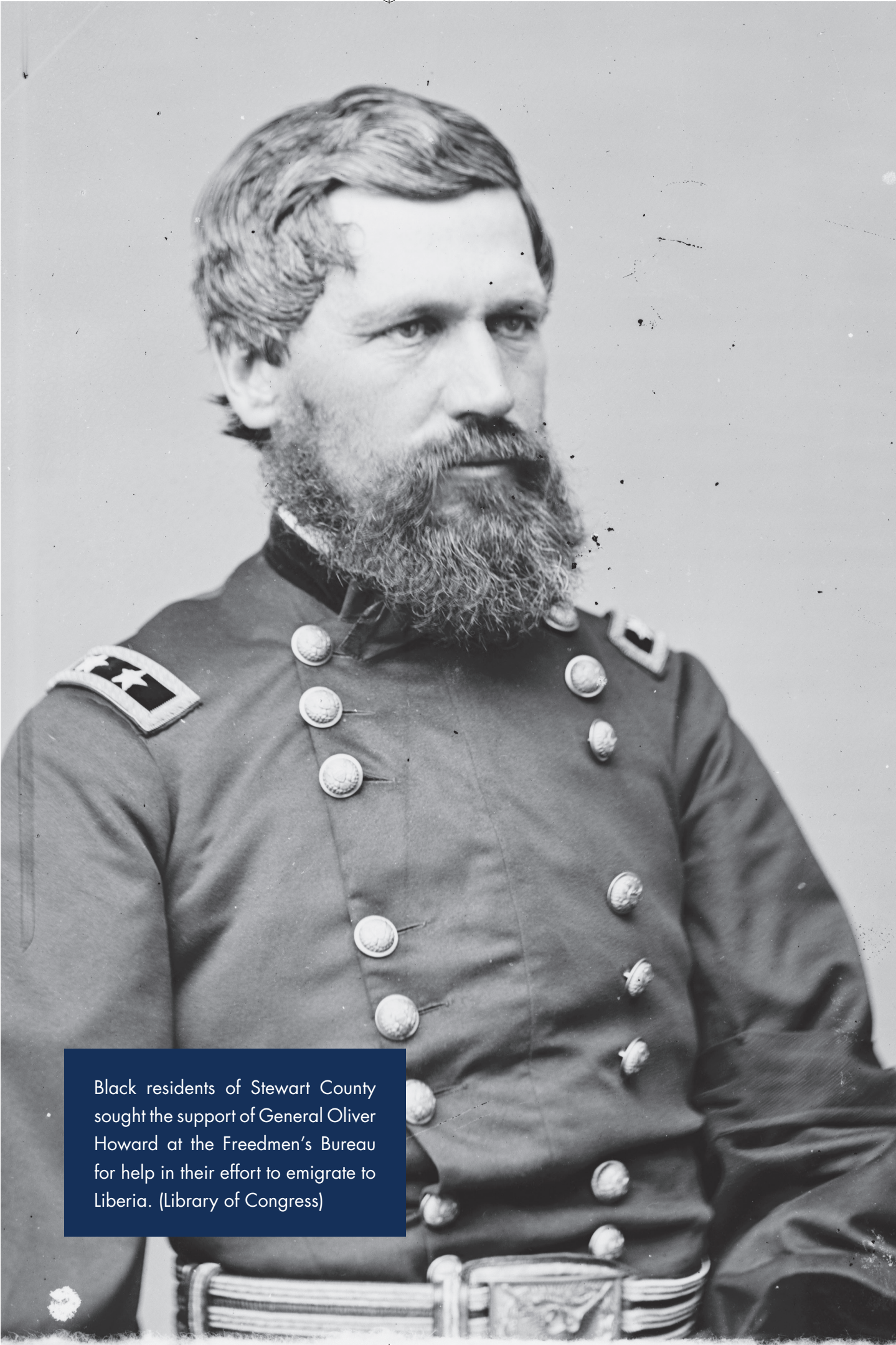
Rural areas were particularly at the mercy of white terror. During this period black schools, churches, and political organizations were often targeted by white vigilantes because they challenged the dominant social and racial order.²¹ In 1866 freedmen in Montgomery County held meetings to defend themselves against violent whites. Members of the Rough and Ready Alliance armed themselves for protection, and in doing so undoubtedly offended local whites. A witness from neighboring Stewart County reported that members were attacked that



In the 1850s, prominent ironworks owner Montgomery Bell chose to send two groups of twenty-eight and twenty-one former slaves to Liberia. (Tennessee State Library and Archives)

January. The assailants took the group's arms and robbed one man of fifteen dollars.²² Violent acts like these prompted fifty-eight black residents of Stewart County to emigrate to Liberia the following year.

Black residents of Stewart County communicated with each other and with blacks in surrounding areas. Thus they were aware of numerous incidents of racial violence taking place throughout their communities and across county lines. For Fleming Crump, a Baptist minister in Dover, enough was enough—he became an emigration leader and initially sought the help of J. F. Flood, a white captain living nearby. Flood contacted General



Black residents of Stewart County sought the support of General Oliver Howard at the Freedmen's Bureau for help in their effort to emigrate to Liberia. (Library of Congress)

Oliver Howard of the Freedmen's Bureau and was directed to write ACS Secretary William Coppinger on behalf of the fifty-four member party.²³ Crump eventually corresponded with Coppinger himself to explain how freedmen in Stewart County were "oppressed" and in a "needy condition."²⁴ Black separatists like Crump and white sympathizers like Flood would not have been unwarranted in believing that blacks in Middle Tennessee had to leave the state in order to be free from oppression. Crump ultimately arrived in Liberia in 1867.

Although the number of emigrants who actually left for Liberia was relatively small compared to the black population in the South, it reflects a larger interest in escaping the region's repressive conditions. Moreover, the small number masks significant complexity: many supporters of territorial separatism were actually prevented from emigrating. In 1866, for example, the emigration plans of a group of ex-slaves in Williamson County were stalled by their deceased former owner's relatives, who claimed for themselves the \$25,000 he had set aside for their removal to Liberia.²⁵ Many reasons, not only financial need or judicial wrangling, could have impeded more black supporters from actually relocating. The difficulty associated with leaving family and friends or the effects of disease and other physical ailments are but a few of the many obstacles that worked to impede black emigration.

Sometimes rumors and bad press could also cause local movement enthusiasm to dissipate. In 1866 the Nashville-based newspaper *The Union and American* warned black emigrants to "be sure that they are really going to Liberia, and not to Cuba, or some other country where they would be worth from \$800 to \$1,200 per head!" The following year the *Clarksville Chronicle* added strength to such reports by claiming to know of at least one prominent South Carolinian, who, owning a plantation in Cuba, had purchased one of his former slaves on the island. The paper declared that a reliable source informed "that the freedmen are being shipped from various points on the Southern coast, ostensibly as free emigrants to Liberia, but in reality to be disposed of slaves to Cuban planters."²⁶ Many separatist supporters in Middle Tennessee may have been swayed from emigrating by such unverified rumors published in the city's paper.

Negative firsthand accounts provided perhaps the strongest deterrent. After hearing of the hardship, death, and misfortune in Liberia, potential emigrants could easily lose confidence in the venture and decide to stay put. A few days before the Dover emigrants were set to depart in November 1867 the *Nashville Union and Dispatch* republished a scathing article about recent emigrants from South Carolina. The paper suggested that the ACS engaged in an ongoing conspiracy to publish falsified reports about



Negative firsthand accounts deterred some potential emigrants from setting out for Liberia. One emigrant reported in 1867 that "newcomers are tricked and cajoled on every side." (Ashmun Street, Monrovia, Liberia, in 1893, Library of Congress)

their success, while in reality neglecting to report the overwhelming degradation experienced by most emigrants. A firsthand account taken from an immigrant who had returned to the U.S. after eight months in Liberia testified that "newcomers are tricked and cajoled on every side" by the established Americo-Liberian community. He also revealed the high mortality rate among arriving immigrants, and went on to declare that native Liberians ate "cats, snakes, rats, snails, worms and

every description of vermin" to the disgust of new settlers. As such, this person insisted, newcomers longed to return to "the big plantation [where] they ate out all creation, reveling [sic], all the year round, in richest hog and hominy."²⁷

Not everyone was convinced by such rhetorical flourishes. Fleming Crump read and distributed tracts of the *African Repository*, a newspaper supporting colonization and published by the ACS, to the illiterate members of his party, who made

up more than half of the group. Crump would more than likely have debated advice given in the *Daily Union and Dispatch* as well. The newspaper's suggested that southern blacks should "pitch politics to the winds and keep steadily at work, [so that] they could live better and more comfortably, and more profitably in the Southern country than in any Liberia, real or imaginary," but Crump and the fifty-seven others in his party remained resolute. They reportedly were hopeful that "they will better their condition" in addition to helping "to civilize and christianize (sic) the natives of Africa."²⁸

While the particular reason why this group chose Liberia over Kansas remains a mystery, scholars certainly understand why they undertook the expedition when they did: to avoid the worst excesses of a period of intense political upheaval and racialized violence. Although black Tennesseans from other regions also chose emigration to end their oppression, they connected it more to economic than political intimidation.

During the late 1860s and early 1870s the suppression of black agricultural enterprise led some Tennessee freedmen to seek livelihoods in Kansas. Unlike the Middle Tennessee emigrants to Liberia, these West Tennessee participants in the Exoduster Movement were primarily driven by economic motivations. Immediately following the Civil War the Freedmen's Bureau in Tennessee coerced ex-slaves into signing labor contracts to work for wages

on plantations. This policy is most readily observable in West Tennessee, where in 1866 nearly 1,700 Memphis-area freedmen entered into such contracts. In the coming years sharecropping, credit and delayed payment arrangements became more prevalent in order to overcome the planter's lack of revenue and to secure labor from the ex-slaves.²⁹ Although such arrangements afforded freed people some economic liberties, it did not fulfill their desire for land ownership and economic independence.

Land ownership was critical for post-bellum black Tennesseans. Writing about Tennessee's freedmen, General Clinton B. Fisk observed, "The mass of them have been made to believe that the plantations of rebels were all to be divided out among the former slaves—and daily applications are made for their portion."³⁰ The hopes of black land ownership through governmental redistribution programs officially ended when Reconstruction fell apart in Tennessee. In 1870 the Freedmen's Bureau departed the state and with it went appropriation for community schools, local courts where blacks could hold whites accountable for their mistreatment, and perhaps most notably the hope for economic advancement.³¹ In this same period, black Tennesseans organized the first emigration movements to Kansas.

Support for emigration to Kansas gained momentum throughout the 1870s. Many emigrants came from the counties



General Clinton B. Fisk observed that Tennessee's freedmen "have been made to believe that the plantations of rebels were all to be divided out among the former slaves..." (Tennessee State Library and Archives)

located along the Mississippi, although others came from Middle Tennessee counties including Maury, Davidson, and Rutherford.³² New Kansas communities with names such as "Tennessee Town" attest to the popularity of the Exoduster Movement in the Volunteer State. During the ten year period from 1870 to 1880 the percentage of black Kansas settlers originally from Tennessee increased from 4% of the total population to 12%. By 1890 more than six thousand black Kansans

claimed Tennessee as their original birthplace.³³

Although predominant in West Tennessee, interest in emigration to Kansas was present in Middle Tennessee as well. During the height of the Exoduster Movement blacks in Clarksville, Tennessee, formed the Colored People Cooperative Land and Emigrant Association. The organization's primary grievances were economic. Members wrote Governor John St. John of Kansas and inquired about the opportunities for work within the state. Members of the cooperative described how blacks throughout the Clarksville area were impoverished, and lamented that although the movement had a lot of support, many who wanted to emigrate did not have the means to do so.³⁴

Economic opportunity was the platform of Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, the unofficial leader of the Exoduster Movement in Tennessee. At various times a slave, a fugitive, and a scavenger, he had been on the economic fringes of society most of his life. Because of these experiences he understood the importance of economic security and made it a fundamental part of his separatist ideology. Singleton was founder of the Edgefield Real Estate Association, an organization which sought to secure land purchases for black Tennessee farmers, and eventually found excellent prospects in Kansas. He first began to take emigrants to Kansas during the late 1860s, although his high-

TENNESSEE EMIGRATION MOVEMENTS TO LIBERIA

County	City	Number	Year
Davidson	Nashville	8	1868
Davidson	Nashville	9	1869
Davidson	Nashville	1	1880
Jefferson	Strawberry Plains	39	1873
Knox	Knoxville	144	1866
Loudon	Philadelphia	7	1867
Loudon	Philadelphia	10	1869
Stewart	Dover	58	1867
Tipton	Mason	3	1869
Wayne	Cypress Inn	2	1874

est numbers came during the economic depression of the early 1870s. Eventually he helped to found three farming settlements in Kansas: the Dunlap Colony in Morris and Lyon Counties, the Singleton Colony in Cherokee County, and Nicodemus Colony in Graham County.³⁵

Singleton championed the importance of economic self-sufficiency, specifically in the form of available land for farming. During the height of the Exodus he told a reporter that in Tennessee “the whites had the lands and the sense [cents], and de blacks had nothing but their freedom.” He believed blacks “ought to be trying to get homes of their own, lands of their own, instead of depending on renting from their former masters or subsisting.”³⁶ Singleton’s statement may not have been grammatically correct, but he chose his words carefully. Black Tennesseans were experiencing a new wave of violence and

Singleton needed to convey the importance of economic independence while minimizing white hostility to black economic aspirations.

Much of the violence committed against freedmen by whites in West Tennessee drew from attempts to maintain control over black labor. Freedmen’s Bureau officials in Hickman County noted that violence commonly erupted when freedmen attempted to settle their earnings for the previous year with employers. Some had remained in a state of near-slavery for fear of death at the hands of whites. Bureau officials knew of at least six who had been shot and killed while attempting to escape.³⁷

During the mid-1870s racial tensions and violence again increased dramatically.³⁸ The racial unrest was particularly acute in West Tennessee, where lynchings occurred more frequently than any other

area in the state. At least fifty-six blacks were lynched there between 1861 and 1931. Between Lauderdale and Shelby Counties, over fifty blacks were killed in acts of mob violence. In Lauderdale County three black men were lynched during the late 1860s and early 1870s, while in 1866 an estimated forty-six blacks died when race riots consumed Memphis.³⁹ Participation in the 1870s Exoduster Movement was most significant in this area, where black economic subjugation and violent conditions were most severe.

In East Tennessee separatist movements occurred in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Racial violence surrounded their emergence as well. As in Middle Tennessee, radical and conservative political factions fought for control in the east. On July 23, 1867, in Hawkins County a small riot occurred between Conservative and Radical elements. One black man, Daniel Horn, and one white man, J. York, were killed. As many as seven others were wounded during the incident.⁴⁰ The day of that riot a man identified by local authorities as a black radical was shot dead in Knoxville. The increase of violence was so great that Governor William G. Brownlow stationed a regiment of the Tennessee State Guard in the area. William Walker, the Freedmen's commissioner in the Knoxville sub-district, knew of numerous other murders but did not have enough details about the incidents to submit a report.⁴¹ The upsurge in politi-

cal violence in late 1860s East Tennessee spurred the emigration of 144 freedmen from Knox County to Liberia in 1866.

Motivated by political violence, the Knox County movement presents scholars with a unique opportunity to study not only when and why social movements emerge, but also how they occurred and progressed. The Knox County emigration movement spread into neighboring counties that were experiencing similar disruptive local conditions and illustrates how participants in one area can inspire participation nearby.⁴² This phenomenon is most observable through networks of information diffusion and leadership. From 1867 to 1873, the emergence of a Knox County emigration movement encouraged over 200 blacks from three different areas in East Tennessee to participate in emigration movements to Liberia.

Because most emigrants were ex-slaves, fundamental resources such as literacy and wealth were scarce.⁴³ Under these conditions, it was not uncommon for potential emigrants to seek assistance from trusted acquaintances. Sharing resources and information caused the discourse on emigration to spread, eventually finding new recruits outside of the original network of supporters. Emigration leaders particularly took advantage of pre-existing communication networks. When Reverend Hopkins W. Erskine arrived in Knoxville from Liberia in the summer of 1866 he quickly began recruiting local residents. In Knoxville, he recruited

dozens of participants for emigration to Liberia. He also traveled to surrounding areas in both Tennessee and Georgia. That September, Erskine forwarded the names of over two hundred participants to the ACS from New Market, in Jefferson County, and expected more names to come in from the nearby towns of Dandridge and Strawberry Plains.⁴⁴ His success in recruiting would not have been possible without the existence of a shared network of communication.

Erskine first emigrated from Knoxville to Liberia when he was only ten years old. Under the auspices of Dr. Isaac Anderson and John Caldwell, his father George had become a minister in the Presbyterian Church. He was freed by a special act of the General Assembly in 1817, and for the next ten years he worked to free his entire family of nine. The family emigrated to Liberia in 1829.⁴⁵ Hopkins Erskine's story is bittersweet. Most of his family died shortly after arriving in Liberia, but by emigrating he was able to attend school. Eventually he became an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church. He gained national recognition when he was elected to the Liberian House of Representatives in 1853, and continued to play an active role in Liberian politics for decades.⁴⁶

The Erskine family history in East Tennessee, Hopkins Erskine's political attainments, and his connection with the ministry all worked to legitimize him and his cause in the eyes of the local black community. Through his new-found

supporters he efficiently circulated news about Liberian emigration throughout the area. Regarding his progress Erskine wrote,

I distributed the tracks [sic] and pamphlets you were kind enough to give me and then began to talk, and reason with them.—as soon as—I became known to our people and inform them that I was born in Knoxville and had lived in Liberia for 26 years, both white and black crowded around me, seeking information.⁴⁷

Erskine's presence undoubtedly reassured apprehensive and uncertain movement sympathizers with his first-hand accounts of Liberia, enabling him to lead the largest emigration movement of blacks from the state during the postwar period.

Not everyone in the community supported Erskine's recruitment efforts, of course, and some passionately denounced emigration. According to the local newspaper, a lecture he delivered in Knoxville in October 1866 to a black assembly initially "did not meet with much encouragement from his bretheren (sic)" and was particularly opposed by a black Methodist minister. Erskine was undeterred. He continued to try to convince his audience of the opportunities for economic success in Liberia by describing the liberal homestead allotments, free transportation costs, and six-month provisions guaranteed to new emigrants. He was unsuccessful in

this instance in convincing the audience that “Africa was the true home of the negro.”⁴⁸

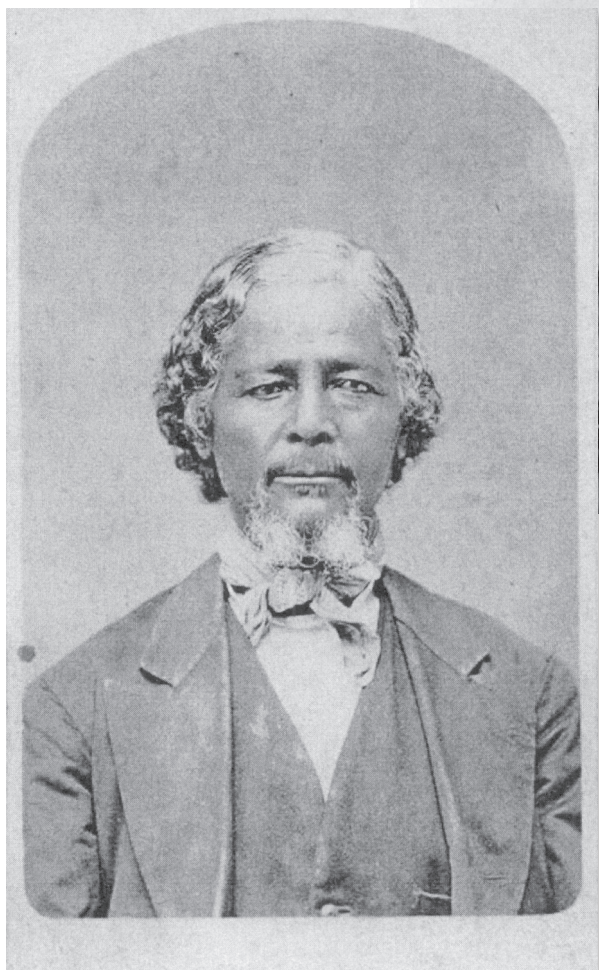
Gradually, however, Erskine’s personal experiences in Liberia began to endear him to separatist supporters. As movement sympathizers learned more about his accomplishments and East Tennessee heritage they began to feel more trusting. By the end of his trip he had gained the names of over two hundred individuals willing to emigrate to Liberia. Erskine also received support from influential whites such as Governor William Brownlow, who encouraged him to expand his recruitment activities to areas in Middle and West Tennessee, and his old family friend John Caldwell, who helped publicize his recruitment efforts.⁴⁹ In August 1867 Caldwell helped publish a letter by Erskine in the *Nashville Union and Dispatch*, and more than likely newspapers in East Tennessee as well. In it Erskine proclaimed that 1866 Knoxville emigrants were happy in their new homes—homesteads had already been allotted, their settlement location possessed plenty of timber for building purposes, water was plentiful, trade was abundant, and the soil seemed to say, “Come and till me and I will reward your industry a thousand fold.”

Although illiteracy was prevalent during Reconstruction, utilizing resources such as collective reading and writing gave the black community access to valuable information about emigration. When

one interested person possessed information, they shared it with others. It had the effect of networking in association with the cause of black emigration. This type of information sharing took place throughout the state, but is most readily observed in the spread of emigration movements in East Tennessee. One freedman, for example, wrote to William Copping:

Your repository of this month has made its appearances giving me full particulars of the proceeding of newly elective officers of the Republic of Liberia and the address of President Roye made at Monrovia the capitol Jan the 3rd. I have read to much interest his address and have read it to hundreds of my fellow subjects who were quite anxious to hear of the welfare of Liberia.⁵⁰

The African Repository courted black Southerners and published stories that would resonate with them. An 1867 article declared that in the country of Liberia, “Agriculture is still the leading interest, and the facility with which large crops of sugar, coffee, rice, &c., are raised and put into market gives promise of an important development.” The same article highlighted the success of one particular planter who grew enough cane “to make four hundred thousand pounds of sugar, five thousand gallons of molasses, and two thousand gallons of syrup.”⁵¹ Reports on agricultural enterprise such as this one



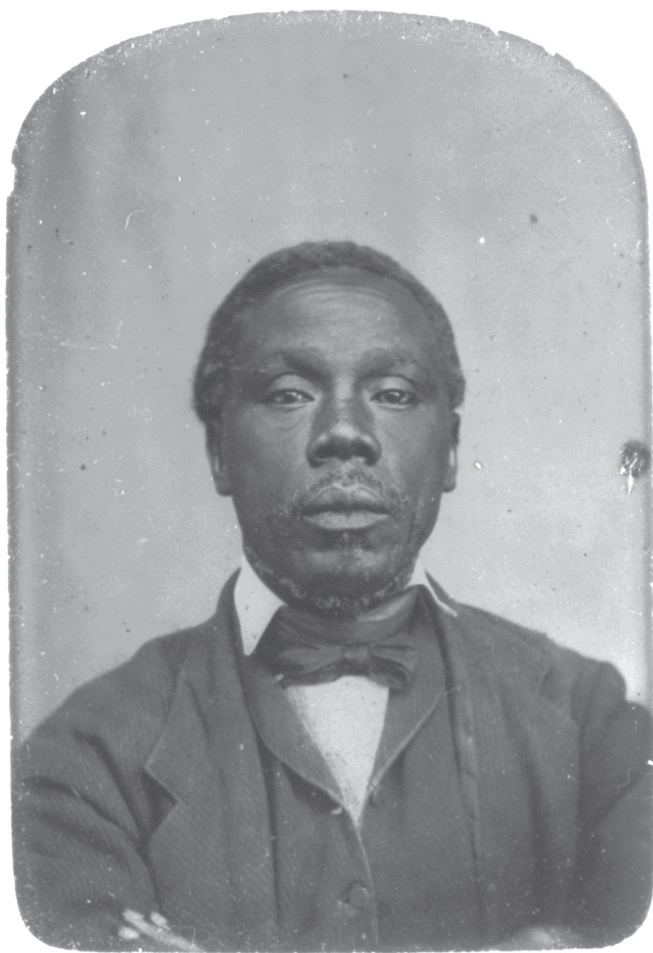
Benjamin Singleton was the unofficial leader of the Exoduster Movement in Tennessee. He helped found three farming settlements in Kansas, including Nicodemus. (Singleton, Kansas State Historical Society, and Nicodemus, Library of Congress)

would be read at meetings and retold many times over by supporters.

In 1866, the same year that the Knoxville expedition left for Liberia aboard the brig *Golconda*, the *African Repository* published a letter by a native daughter of the region, Martha Erskine Ricks. Ricks was the daughter of the Reverend George Erskine and the only surviving sister of Hopkins Erskine. In this letter she lauded the Liberian's industriousness and the successes of various agricultural pursuits, including the raising of arrowroot, pepper, ginger, cocoa, cof-

fee, and sugar cane. During the Civil War imports to Liberia had occurred irregularly and Ricks was forced by necessity to learn to weave in order to clothe herself and her family. In a message that had the double meaning of self-affirmation and racial assertion, she implored other black East Tennesseans to uplift themselves and to do "what we ought to have done years ago, instead of waiting and depending on America."⁵²

In the years following the Knoxville movement, smaller emigration movements to Liberia sprang up in neigh-



During a trip from Liberia to Knoxville in 1866, Hopkins Erskine posed for photographer T.M. Schleier. Erskine recruited dozens of participants for emigration. (Library of Congress)

boring Jefferson and Loudon Counties. Erskine had correctly predicted that after the 1866 Knoxville emigrants left “many of their friends will join them soon.” Other sources confirmed that many were influenced to participate by the “desire to join their relatives and acquaintances who have written for them to come over and share their blessed privileges.” James Nelson, a school teacher in Philadelphia

in neighboring Loudon County, thought he could recruit about fifty people for an 1867 emigration. Although a much smaller number, seven, actually left that year, over the next few years more than fifty others emigrated to Liberia. Nelson commented that some local blacks were enticed to stay in the state because of new political rights such as the right to serve on juries and hold public office, but for him those developments had “not changed my purpose.” He was unequivocal: “God sparring [sic] my life I shall go and induce as many others to do the same as I.”⁵³ Other black East Tennesseans gradually agreed with Nelson. In 1869 ten emigrants left Loudon County, and in 1873 thirty-nine departed from neighboring Jefferson County.

Diffusion of information can also account for why movements from one locale occurred at different times. In 1866 Daniel McMillan of Jefferson County decided not to join his son Samuel and his family when they left with the Knox County group. Samuel McMillan was a recruitment agent who regularly corresponded with the ACS. In 1866 he reported to have the names of over forty interested persons in the Knox, Jefferson, and Loudon County areas. Samuel, who worked as an engineer, probably sought similar work in his new home in Cape Mount, Liberia. He, like so many emigrants, would have continued to correspond with family and friends back home. After hearing presumably positive reports

and witnessing deteriorating economic and political prospects at home, seventy-five year old Daniel opted to join his son in 1873. He left with his wife Rachel, numerous members of his extended family and thirty-two other separatists from the small town of Strawberry Plains in Jefferson County.⁵⁴

The McMillan family is reflective of a larger successive trend in emigration movements whereby a particular area will experience multiple emigration movements spanning several years. Often one family or family member emigrated first to survey a region before the rest of the emigration party followed. If the new destination proved suitable the initial emigrant would encourage others to come. If, by contrast, success in his or her new home was not achieved, then warnings would be given of the various hardships. Letters to friends and family waiting to hear reviews were an integral part of the decision making process.

Tennessee's emigration movements are representative of black emigration movements occurring throughout the South in the late nineteenth century. The close spatial proximity of the Tennessee movements to one another provide fitting illustrations of the general cluster pattern in the South, whereby movements spread into nearby areas and positively affect movement development. They also illustrate the importance of information diffusion and first-hand accounts in facilitating movement participation.

The Tennessee experience shows how blacks rationalized emigration to locales such as Liberia or Kansas in light of acute social violence and economic or political strain. While it is true that in most areas of the state emigration movements did not emerge, the more important conclusion is that when and where emigration movements occurred unstable and violent conditions were present. The experiences of black Tennesseans, though unique, are comparable to those of other black southerners. Studying their grassroots movements offers scholars new insights into radical black thought and protest in the United States.

1. Walter Fleming, "Pap Singleton, the Moses of the Colored Exodus," *The American Journal of Sociology* 15 (July 1909): 67.

2. Kenneth C. Barnes, *The Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the late 1800s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Claude Andrew Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Marvin Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West 1877–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977); Edwin Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and back-to-Africa Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

3. Claude Andrew Clegg, "Africa and the African American imagination," (Ann Arbor,

Mich.: ProQuest Information and Learning, 2006): 24.

4. Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Jane and William H. Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963); Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings, Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

5. Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 3 and 361.

6. Robert McKenzie, "Freedmen and the Soil in the Upper South: The Reorganization of Tennessee Agriculture, 1865–1880" *The Journal of Southern History* (February 1993): 68; See also Judy Bussell LeForge, "State Colored Conventions of Tennessee, 1865–1866" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* (March 2006): 231–253.

7. *Proceedings of the Colored State Convention*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1871), 14.

8. *Proceedings of the Colored State Convention*, 10.

9. *Proceedings of the Colored State Convention*, 14.

10. "The Black States," *The Christian Recorder*, 21 August 1876.

11. Some black missionaries, such as Alexander Crummell of the American Episcopal Church, manifested their own form of elitism by advocating emigration while criticizing aspects of African or lower class black American culture. Men like Crummell also privileged Western or upper class white cultural practices and achievement. For more on the civilizing mission see Tunde Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Michelle Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Carolina Press, 2004); Jeremiah Moses Wilson, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jeremiah Moses Wilson, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism 1850–1925* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978), 23. Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5. Wilson, *Alexander Crummell*, 7–8; Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans*, 9.

12. Mike Meacham, "The Exoduster Movement," *Western Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 27 no. 2 (Summer 2003): 6; Rawle Farley cites the desire for land and liberty as being the "most decisive and continuous" objectives held by slaves in Jamaica that helped instigate the end of slavery and the free village settlements. For more information see Rawle Farley, "The Rise of Village Settlements in British Guiana," in *Apprenticeship and Emancipation*, ed. Rex Nettleford, et al. (Mona, Jamaica: Dept. of Extra-Mural Studies, University of the West Indies, 1970), 59. The freedmen in Jamaica also sought economic and political independence after emancipation. For more information see Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 149.

13. Frederick Douglass, "The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States," (Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library), 46.

14. Pease, *Black Utopia*, 25–44.

15. Selena Sanderfer, "For Land and Liberty: Black Territorial Separatism in the South, 1776–1904," (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2010), 249–251; Richard J. M. Blackett, "Montgomery Bell and William E. Kennedy, Middle Tennessee and Liberian Colonization," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* Vol. 69 No. 4 (Winter 2010): 292–319.

16. Caitlin A. Fitz, "The Tennessee Anti-Slavery Movement and the Market Revolution, 1815–1835," *Civil War History* 52 (2006): 5–40; Jonathan M. Atkins, *Parties, Politics, and the Sectional Conflict in Tennessee, 1832–1861*

(Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 4; “Philip Lindsley et al., to the Tennessee General Assembly, October 25, 1833, Legislative Petitions,” ed. Loren Schweninger, vol. 1, *The Southern Debate Over Slavery: Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1778–1864* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 143–145; Sanderfer, “For Land and Liberty,” 75–78.

17. Alrutheus A. Taylor, *The Negro in Tennessee, 1865–1880* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Pub., 1941), 106–107; “The Black States,” *The Christian Recorder*, 21 August 1873; Fleming, “Pap Singleton, the Moses of the Colored Exodus,” 73–75; Representatives at the convention were quoting Abraham Lincoln when he referred to the independent black nation of Haiti.

18. Paul D. Phillips, “A History of the Freedmen’s Bureau in Tennessee,” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1964), 267–325. Williamson County became a particular hotbed of postwar politics. Although some freedmen in the county supported Conservative Democrats, most supported the Union League Republicans. Racial violence intensified as the two factions wrestled for political dominance. Freedmen fought on both sides during the political riots that rocked the county seat of Franklin in 1867, which resulted in the death of twenty-seven blacks. James Jones, “The Battle of Franklin: A Reconstructive Narrative,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 64 no. 2 (Summer 2005): 111, 115–116.

19. “News of the Week. States and Territories,” *The Christian Recorder*, 26 September 1868.

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21. Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860–1870* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 204–205.

22. Target 2, Outrages, Riots, Murders. January 1866–August 1868. Reel 34, 11, TBRFL.

23. J. Flood to Secretary William Coppinger, 13 August 1867, Dover, Tenn. Reel 100. Records of the American Colonization Society, Library of Congress (hereafter referred to as ACS); J. P. Flood to Secretary William Coppinger, Dover, Tenn., 19 July 1867. Reel 100. ACS.

24. Fleming Crump to Secretary William Coppinger, Dover, Tenn., 2 September 1876. Reel 115. ACS.

25. John Seys to Revered William McClain, Nashville, Tenn., 7 February 1866. Reel 98. ACS.

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27. “Liberia. Gloomy Account of Colonization—The Africo-American Republic—The ‘Golconda’ Emigrants—Two Hundred and Fifty Out of Six Hundred Already Dead” *Nashville Union and Dispatch*, 13 November 1867, 1.

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31. Lester Lamon, *Blacks in Tennessee, 1791–1970*, 3rd edition (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 41.

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33. William Cohen, *From Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1991), 170.

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36. "The Originator of the Exodus," *The Chicago Tribune*, 22 April 1879, 2.

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